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ABSTRACT

For an educator who teaches English in a multicultural setting, the best way to accommodate marked features of African-American vernacular English (AAVE) in black students' freshman essays is to preserve these features in teaching students narrative writings and guide African-American students to avoid these features in expository (academic) essays such as argumentative essays and research papers. This paper explores classroom research which focuses on how to guide black students in using their personal voices appropriately when writing narrative essays and avoid these features in their expository essays and research papers. Personal interviews were used and classroom activities were designed that engage black students in understanding that their personal voices are acceptable in their discourse communities or in narrative essays but not in academic discourse. Some of the classroom activities involved sequenced writing assignments focusing on AAVE features for an English 1101 class with a majority of black students. The assignments consisted of: (1) a narrative essay; (2) a comparison and contrast essay; (3) an evaluation essay; (4) an argumentative essay; and (5) a research oriented solution essay. This sequenced assignment method has proved to be useful and effective with most of the ebonics-influenced writers in the class. Educators should explain to their students that everyone comes from a different discourse community, but that understanding people from different communities is easier when all can communicate in the communal discourse community: edited American English. (NKA)

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Accommodating Marked Features of Ebonics in Freshman Essays: From a Narrative Essay to a Research Paper.

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Accommodating Marked Features of Ebonics in Freshman Essays

From a Narrative Essay to a Research Paper.

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Statement of the problem

We English teachers, who teach English in a multicultural setting especially in South Florida, need to imagine accommodating linguistic differences from African-American students. African-American students comprise one third of my freshman composition classes. The best way to accommodate marked features of African-American Vernacular English or Ebonics in these Black students' essay is that we preserve these features in teaching student narrative writings and guide African-American students to avoid these features in expository (academic) essays such as argumentative essays and research paper. In his article "Being Black at a Predominantly White University," Wallace contents that "English professors, and indeed the whole community of higher education, should not encourage assimilation or resistance per se; rather our responsibility is to provide opportunities for

students to explore the consequences of assimilation or resistance and to make those choices for themselves (324).

There is a lack of research distinguishing between how to utilize black students' personal voices in their narrative essays and how to modify black students' AAVE features in standard expository essays. We need to explore the ways by which we composition teachers can accommodate or modify our black student vernacular English in their expository writings. We need suggestions on how to help Black students who bring their home language to our composition classes in positioning their authentic voices with academic voices, especially in argumentative writing and research papers.

This classroom research focuses on how to help or guide Black students in using their personal voices appropriately when writing narrative essays and avoid these features in their expository essays such as an argumentative essay and a research paper. I have used the method of personal interview and designed classroom activities that engage Black students in understanding that their personal voices are acceptable in their discourse communities such as home or in their narrative essays where they can speak their hearts and tell stories. In the mean time, they need to be taught how they can avoid using marked features in BEV in writing their

expository essays except in dialogue or quotations. The present presentation will attempt to answer two questions:

1. How should English teachers encourage Black students' authentic voices in their narrative essays and help students distinguish the differences between the effective use of features in Ebonics or AAVE and the need to modify these features in the argumentative and research papers?

2. How do we explain to Black students why they should not use feature of Ebonics in argumentative essays and academic research papers?

Proposed Possible Solutions

My composition classes constitute one thirds of the African-American students, and their essays exhibit BE marked features such as "double negative, disagreement between subject and verb, and the use of the indefinite second person pronoun "you" when they could use a more analytical third person pronoun "one" or " a person." My Black students have exhibited in their writings a difficulty in distinguishing personal voices from academic voices. In teaching and assigning narrative essay, we composition teachers should empower Black students' personal voices in their narrative writings

and modify their personal voices such as *double negatives* and the use of initial *be* in expository essays.

The following is paragraph written by Danny, a BE speaker in my English 1101 class last term:

> *For many years teens have wondered why they can't purchase alcohol at 18. Of course,* ***you*** *can say that 18 is kind of young to drink. But if that's the case, 18 is also too young for war, 2-ton vehicles that move 100 mph, guns, and marriage. All of these are legal at 18 years of age but an Olde English "800" is illegal at 18 years of age. My position on this issue is very clear. If* **you** *are 18 years old, you should be allowed to buy alcohol beverages. This is how I feel because* ***you*** *can drive a car at 18, but a gun at 18, and go to war overseas at 18."*

Notice how frequently the indefinite pronoun "you" has been used in this passage. How are we going to accommodate their AAVE features such as the infinite "you" as shown in Danny's essay in the essays they write for freshman composition classes? Scholars such as Evans, Campbell, and Troutman have given specific suggestions about the strategies in bringing our African-American students personal voices in their writing when it is

appropriate. However, the suggestions they give on "positioning black student personal or vernacular voices into their writing" are only limited to narrative writings. The reality is that our freshman composition classes teach not only narrative and descriptive essays but also expository and argumentative essays. These expository essays include definition, comparison and contrast, argumentative writing, and a research paper.

Five sequenced writing assignments

I have designed sequenced writing assignments focusing on the features in AAVE for my English 1101 classes that constitute the majority of Black students.

Assignment #1--**A Narrative Essay**

To demonstrate to Black students the effective use of AAVE features in story writing, I assign my students to read the novel-- The Color Purple. Students are encouraged to identify the features of AAVE, which they also use at home as shown in Walker's passage:

> *Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She* ***say*** *it too soon, Fonso, I* ***ain't*** *well. (1)*

After being shown that these features are accepted and used in the Pulitzer-Price Wining novel-writing, students feel more encouraged to use those features in their own narrative essays in which they are required to

narrate a most impressive event that has happened to them. They can create dialogues and passages alive with BE features to make their story sound more realistic and expressive. I have my students write dialogues using features of Ebonics and read each other's dialogue to their classmates. Most of them find this practice relevant and interesting to their own lives.

Assignment #2--**A Comparison and Contrast Essay**

To demonstrate to the Black students that Dr. King who may be familiar with BE features in spoken English, has a good command of Standard English and used it in his famous speech, I ask the students to read "I have a dream," comparing the language used in King's Speech and Alice Walker's novel in terms of the themes, the syntactic features, and semantic features; King's writing is direct and to the point, whereas Walker's writing is more circular and indirect. Therefore, students learn the difference in discourse organizational pattern between a narrative writing and expository writings. A group activity in class would be to have students identify places where they could have used features of AAVE while Dr. King used Standard English. Finally, I have my students write comparison and contrast essays comparing the use of features of AAVE narrative writing and the use of

Standard English in expository essays written by established African-American writers.

Assignment #3--**An Evaluation Essay**

In this essay assignment, students are asked to evaluate King's speech "I Have Dream" from the four standards: its argument, evidence, logic reasoning, pathetic appeal, and the use of figurative speech such as analogies and repetition. This essay assignment help the students realize that Dr. King has used Standard English instead of AAVE in his argument to appeal to a wider audience.

Assignment #4--**An Argumentative Essay** taking a position

In this position essay, students are asked to take a position on a controversial issue related to the debate of Ebonies. They could argue on issues such as:

a. Should AAVE be regard as a dialect or a systematic language?
b. Should we take AAVE into account in teaching Standard English?
c. Should Black student also maintain proficiency in AAVE along with Standard English?

Writing an argument essay taking a position on one of these Ebonies-related issues will help Black student understand their position better.

Assignment #5--**A Research -oriented Solution Essay**

In this essay, students will have a chance to express any problem or concerns or confusions they have about the use of features in Ebonics in narrative and Standard English in expository essays and voice a solution they think fit to solve some of the problems.

Double-Entry NoteBook

In the implementation of these sequence writing assignments, I have also used Ann Bertoff's double-entry notebook for students reading and journal writing assignments. On the left side of the entry, students write down the features of AAVE such as "now we all know she *going* sometime soon" (Walker 80), and on the right side of the entry, students write down the standard forms they think correspond to the AAVE features.

These sequenced writing assignments show the students step by step that voices both marked features and their discourse organization patterns are unique and can be used for creative writing pieces such as their narrative writing and some part of the expository writing such as dialogue and quotations where appropriate. However, they need to be careful when they use their personal voices in expository essays such as argument and research because they are encouraged to use more academic writing in expository essays. This sequenced assignment method has proven to be useful and

effective with most of my Ebonics-influenced writers in English 1101. They have learned that the EB features both at syntactic level and discourse level are accepted in telling stories of themselves in expressive writing and that these features, once, recognized, can be avoided and in expository essays except in dialogues and quotations.

How do we explain to Black students the reasons that they should not use features of Ebonics in argumentative essays and academic research papers?

We need to explain to our students that although features such as double negative in BEV are effective in dialogues and stories, these features are not encouraged in academic or research papers just in the same way that the features influenced by the dialect spoken by Irish-Americans and produced by an Irish-American student as included in Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations in the following passage:

> My parent were both born in a small town in Ireland, which far better or worse was untouch by modurn science. This was not a hinderance to any of the mother at that time. They were all experince with the proper knowledge of childbirth. One thing that was very influenced to my life occur the man and woman decided to marry. (Shaughnessy 91)

We need to explain to our students that we all come from a different discourse community and speak difference kind of dialect or home language--BEV, Chinese-American English, Irish-American English, or Jewish-American English, which makes us unique and interesting. In the mean time, we need to be able to understand all people from different discourse communities by learning to communicate our common language in our communal discourse community--edited American English.

I would like to end this talk with Hill's notion of double-loop meaning-making:

> A writing teacher who values double-loop learning will be prepared to reach into the questions arising everywhere that borders seem to meet and try to humanize those questions, so that they can be seen as problems of context and relationship...At this contextual site, cultural differences should be expected and looked for: why does this sound foreign? (15)

By explaining and ingraining the differences between the features of BEV and Edited American English, we composition teachers are helping our Ebonics-influenced writers realize the importance of Edited American English in academic settings which will enable them to

communicate in a larger discourse community as well as appreciate the beauty of the features of BEV used effectively in narrative writings.

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